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Leadership Competency Series

What's your USP?

"It's finger-lickin' good" says KFC's USP. "Melts in your mouth, not in your hands" promises M&M's. A USP shapes and reinforces a company's brand and identity. It says what's different about you from all the rest. This is also true with successful individuals and leaders. They offer something unique – Says M.R.Chadnramowly

The Unique Selling Proposition (USP) is your single and most competitive edge. It is about how you are special and different from others. What would you do differently to add value? Most of us do not think about our USP. In a populated country of ours, a vague "me too" which doesn't promise great value, benefit or service is not justifiable or rational reason for others to look at us for value addition.

Your USP is an activity, which you must be able to do consistently. It is a predictable part of your performance. You need not be an expert in all the sub areas of your USP. For instance, transforming innovation into user-friendly applications is an USP of Bill Gates, whereas his ability to maintain and build an enterprise in the face of legal assault is not. Bill Gates did not ignore this weakness area. He selected a partner Steve Ballmer to run the company, allowing him to return to software development and rediscovering his strength.

Marcus Buckingham, co-author of "Now, Discover your strengths" asserts "You will excel only by maximizing your strengths, never by fixing your weaknesses."

Discovering strengths

Accurate self-assessment helps you to know your strengths and weaknesses. Identifying your existing specific competencies is the basic step. Your specific competencies are effortlessly displayed when you are subjected to stress.

Kathie P, a senior manager of a software company has given a dramatic example to the Authors of "Now, Discover your strengths". She was bound for company's annual sales meeting in the Dominican Republic. Flying with her in the back row was Brad, an impatient CEO, in front of him was Amy a genius software designer. Across from her seated was Martin the charming, who through his networking had turned around their European operations. Then, there was Gerry, the insipid head of marketing who, as usual had angled his way into the seat next to Brad.

The problem began right after the take off. They just cleared the clouds when the alarm went off and the plane started braying like a donkey, filling the cabin with a terrible sound, -eee -aww, eee-aww. Main lights went out and emergency lights started flashing red. Plane drop seemed like a thousand feet in a second or two. Kathie looked through the open cabin and saw both the pilots were puzzled not knowing what was going on. Breaking the silence every one started talking at once. Amy craned over and said, “Kathie, can you see the dials? Martin pulled out a tiny bottle of Smirnoff from his bag and jokingly cried out, “At least give me one last drink!” Gerry started rocking back and forth, moaning, “We are all going to die. We are all going to die.”

Brad was immediately at the cockpit door, screaming at the top of his lungs, “What the hell do you think you guys are doing up here?” Kathie was watching. The funny thing was nothing was wrong with the plane at all. A faulty system had triggered the alarm and the pilots had just panicked and pushed the plane into a sharp descent. Each of these reactions under extreme stress revealed dominant talents. Kathie, the observer of human nature was HR Manager. Amy’s instinctive need for precision was the foundation for her genius in software design. Martin’s ability to find the humour in every situation indicates his strength of networking with his European clients. Brad’s compulsion to take charge was the foundation for his leadership. This is a dramatic example of how people reveal themselves under stress. Our daily life offers many such situations provoking revealing reactions.

Individual core competence

Prahalad & Hamel termed the “capabilities that underlie leadership in a range of products or services” as core competence. We can also apply that “core competency” approach to individual leadership development and learning. Given your particular portfolio of competencies, what opportunities are you uniquely positioned to exploit? The answer points to opportunity arena that other people with different competencies may find difficult to access.

Roosevelt’s dynamism, Einstein's brain or Buddha’s Compassion influenced and changed the life on this planet. All the three are known for their individual, specific and inimitable leadership competencies. What you can do, that other people might find difficult to do? Identifying and developing your unique competencies which are some thing special to your very nature and style is the first step to build your USP. How do you orchestrate your knowledge, skill, experience, behaviours and values to decipher from others and to produce desired results? Competency refers to an individual's demonstrated knowledge, skills, behaviours, experience, life view and values. Your competencies are observable, behavioral acts that require a combination of all these attribute to execute.

Identifying USP?

Socrates, 78 AD, did not make money teaching but wrote several “2000-year best sellers”. Many more years before that, Indian ascetics wrote “4000 year best sellers” in “paperless” “oral tradition”. Self Knowledge was the essence of their focus. To know what your USP is, you must demonstrate the competency of Self-knowledge, which is strongly related to your success in life and work.

“Self-knowledge” means, knowing the level of your personal effectiveness. Personal effectiveness is a combination of self-control and self-confidence. Self-Control is the ability to monitor emotions to restrain negative actions. It is an effort, which enables you to maintain your quality of actions overcoming internal stress and external hostile conditions. Self confidence is the belief in your own capability to accomplish an objective. It is your will power to move ahead against daunting challenges, scepticism and indifference. Self-knowledge is the awareness of your level of self-control and self-confidence.

To discover your self knowledge, write down a one-paragraph statement of your USP. Remember this is your single most competitive edge that differentiates you from the rest and gives you a market edge. Write one single statement. It is one or more reasons why prospects should recruit you instead of other candidates. You also need to know how to benchmark you with others and know how you can be different from them in adding value. You can't compete in the world if you don't know what you’re up above the rest. At first, you might struggle expressing the USP tightly and specifically. It may take a few attempts. That’s fine. Ruthlessly edit away the generalities and aggressively hone the shortest, crispest and most specific competency you could possibly hold out. Then, rework it and cull out any excess wording or hazy statements until you have a clearly defined and easily apparent “Unique Selling Proposition” that a prospect can immediately grasp. Then integrate your USP into every word of your CV and interview talk.

Current research

DDI's research has some very interesting findings about this competency: “The best predictor of a high performance appraisal was seeing yourself as others see you.” “The best predictor of low one was overrating your skills.” “Job success depends on really knowing what you are good, average and bad at.” “Known weaknesses don't get you in as much trouble as blind spots.”

If you have the competency of “Self Knowledge”, you are like this. You probably know your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and limits. You seek regular feedback and gain insights from your mistakes. You are open to criticism and drop defensive approach. You have a kind of consistent performance rating which is neither too high nor too low. You don’t rush where you should not and don’t hesitate to jump at when you should.

In the Iceberg model of competency, the visible tip is skill and knowledge — the surface

part of our personality. The deeper invisible areas of our personality include our Self-concept and traits, which is our core personality. The core personality (motive, trait and self concept) drives the surface personality (skill and behaviour). Both combined produce the outcome or the Job performance. We know that it easy to develop the surface personality and most difficult to develop the core. Awareness of this total self-picture is self knowledge.

Remedies to rebuild

Get Feedback. Understand how others see you. Generally people are lulled to sleep by positive feedback. If you ask feedback from people who respect you, most probably, you would get the positive ones. Ask for specific developmental areas. Get feedback from more than one source. One must develop courage to get feedback and put effort to improve. Defensiveness and arrogance kills the opportunity for improvement.

Other leadership competencies like “Relationship Building” “Integrity & Ethics”, and “Communication” are compensators to “self knowledge”. Supportive human values to self knowledge are: steadiness, consistency, politeness, openness, patience, positive attitude, absence of pride and self-sufficiency.

The author is an HR Expert